



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Transgressive decision making: Prospects and boundaries

van der Pligt, J.

Published in:
Acta Psychologica

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Pligt, J. (1989). Transgressive decision making: Prospects and boundaries. *Acta Psychologica*, 69, 71-75.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

TRANSGRESSIVE DECISION MAKING: PROSPECTS AND BOUNDARIES

Comment on J. Koziellecki's 'Towards a theory of transgressive decision making'

Joop VAN DER PLIGT *

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Decision analysis tends to focus on relatively complex, potentially confusing and sometimes stressful decisions. Decision analysts have attempted to develop tools to help improve both rationality of inference and rationality of decision. These tools concern structuring decision problems and ways of dealing with uncertainties and multiple conflicting objectives. Not surprisingly, a considerable amount of research carried out in this field concerns relatively important decisions (see e.g., Von Winterfeldt and Edwards 1986, for a review).

Generally, decision analysts employ prescriptive models of choice. Psychologists have tended to focus on the validity of these prescriptive models as descriptions of human behaviour. Numerous studies have demonstrated that judgments depart significantly from the prescriptions of formal decision theory (see, e.g., Slovic et al. 1977). To account for these findings, psychologists have explored the information processing strategies, or heuristics, that people use when making judgments. Some argue that these heuristics are adaptive mechanisms for dealing with a complex environment and question the adequacy of prescriptive models for evaluating judgment and decision making (see, e.g., Einhorn and Hogarth 1981). Others interpret these heuristics as efforts to overcome cognitive limitations and focus on possible biases in judgment and decision making. It has been argued that research on heuristics and biases occasionally depends on a combination of judge-

* Author's address: J. van der Pligt, Vakgroep Sociale Psychologie, University of Amsterdam, Psychology Laboratory, Weesperplein 8, 1018 XA Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

mental vulnerability and clever stimulus design highlighting this vulnerability (see, e.g., Abelson and Levi 1985; Eiser and Van der Pligt 1988). Research in this field frequently employs artificial tasks or problems of little consequence and does not always focus on behavioural domains that can be assumed to be important to the subject. In other words, there are examples of research areas that tend to rely upon relatively unimportant behavioural domains.

Kozielecki (1988) extends the above argument and states that psychologists have focused largely on *protective* or 'everyday decisions', these are supposed to aim at the maintenance of the status quo and/or increasing the individual's chances of survival. Furthermore, Kozielecki suggests that protective decision making usually concerns routine, schema-driven and simple processes. Psychologists, in his view, tend to focus on trivial, routine and everyday problems, and he argues that more attention should be paid to important decisions. The term *transgressive* is used to denote important decisions. Transgressive decision making (as opposed to protective decision making), plays a crucial role in the development of the individual and in social change. Furthermore, this type of decision making should include generally neglected variables such as 'higher motivation, symbolic value of outcomes, and myths'. In the remainder of his article, Kozielecki provides further definitions of transgressive decision-making, its motivational base and major characteristics. The distinction between protective and transgressive decisions is primarily defined in functional terms; i.e., transgressive decisions go beyond present achievements and serve 'heterostatic or growth motivation'. Kozielecki acknowledges the difficulties in describing the structure of transgressive decisions and suggests that the major characteristics are complexity, novelty, uniqueness, unfamiliarity, lack of definition and their orientation to (long-term) future outcomes.

These difficulties do show in the article. The paper raises some interesting points, but generally in a rather confused manner. Many of the examples mentioned by the author could be defined as both protective *and* transgressive. Most examples concern decisions that affect the interest of multiple stakeholders, i.e., policy decisions where many stakeholders are actively involved in the decision process. Secondly, he tends to concentrate on decisions with far-reaching consequences such as technological decisions that require the consideration of substantial time-spans. It is true that psychological decision theory does not concentrate on these issues, but there are numerous examples

of psychological research investigating aspects of transgressive decision making (see e.g., Humphreys et al. 1983; Brehmer et al. 1986; Hogarth 1988). Transgressive decisions generally deal with ill-defined problems. As Abelson and Levi (1985) note, this research field is rather diffuse. There is no dominant research paradigm and the range of decision problems investigated is very wide. As a consequence research in this field tends to rely upon a variety of disciplines including economics, political sciences, sociology, administrative sciences and psychology. Furthermore, as stated before, these decisions often affect and involve many stakeholders. As a consequence, research should also address group and organizational contexts.

So we are left with a number of decision domains and a list of factors that determine the structure of transgressive decision making (complexity, novelty, etc.). These two ingredients lead to a total of four hypotheses: (a) unrealistic optimism; (b) the increased role of symbolic value; (c) attenuation of expectancy and valence biases; and (d) the gravity center shift. Furthermore, the author argues that these hypotheses should be tested with 'unorthodox' research methods.

It is clear that there is considerable overlap between the four hypotheses (specifically *a*, *c*, and *d*). It is a well known fact that specific biases will play a more important role in relatively ambiguous and complex decision problems. Similarly, information overload is also related to increased reliance upon heuristics and it increases the likelihood of biases affecting the quality of the decision process. It could well be that unrealistic optimism, and generally the attenuation of biases are important characteristics of transgressive decisions but this does not seem particularly surprising given the fact that transgressive decisions are highly complex and relatively ill-defined. It needs to be added that the Pollyanna effect (unrealistic optimism) is well documented (see e.g., Matlin and Stang 1978) and I fail to see what the new term 'Columbus effect' adds, apart from a new name.

The two main contributions of Koziellecki's paper concern the 'gravity center shift' and the role of 'symbolic values' in transgressive decision making. The gravity center shift relates to the assumption that transgressive decision making is accompanied by a tendency to assign greater weight to positive outcomes. A possible explanation could be the vested interest and/or commitment of the decision makers; the emphasis on positive outcomes would simply be a function of wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is a motivated exaggeration of the probabil-

ity of positive outcomes. Generally, however, this exaggeration is quite small (see e.g., Abelson and Levi 1985). The extent to which this tendency is apt to be seriously maladaptive needs to be assessed, however. Since most of the author's examples concern policy decision making it seems necessary to relate his hypotheses to work on group decision making.

The issue of 'symbolic value' in transgressive decision making is interesting. According to Koziellecki the symbolic value of outcomes increases and the utilitarian value of outcomes declines, as compared to protective decision making. Furthermore, enhanced self-esteem and prestige seem important elements of symbolic value. It seems likely that people will find it more difficult to decide which value considerations should be included when confronted with ill-defined, transgressive decisions. Fischhoff et al. (1978) point out that people are most likely to have clear preferences regarding issues that are simple, familiar and directly experienced. Many issues of social policy and new technology, for instance, constitute situations for which we have never thought through the implications of the values and beliefs acquired in simpler settings. It could well be that in such circumstances people are less certain about what they want, hence the enhanced role of a variety of other values including symbolic values. Utility measurement techniques could easily incorporate these values but the problem is that these considerations are often implicit. Quite often, social desirability precludes explicit incorporation of these values. Explicit incorporation of values such as self-esteem and national pride or prestige could help to assess the role of these values in transgressive decision making.

Finally, the author argues that 'new' research methods are required to study transgressive decision making. One of the suggested methods concerns the analysis of verbal protocols. A number of important issues regarding verbal protocol methods need to be mentioned. Interjudge agreement on the interpretation of protocols according to coding schemes indicate reasonable levels of interjudge reliability (e.g., Montgomery 1976; Simon and Newell 1974) but these tend to decrease with increasing complexity. Another issue concerns the validity of verbal protocol measurements. Generally, verbal protocol procedures are non-reactive (see e.g., Montgomery 1976; Carroll and Payne 1977); they may slow the process but appear to leave it basically unaltered. All in all, verbal protocol procedures could be useful for exploratory research, could supplement data collected by other methods, and could be used

to test hypotheses about decision behaviour at the *individual* level. As pointed out before, most of the decisions Koziellecki calls 'transgressive' are group decisions, so verbal protocols of individuals form only part of the relevant data.

Koziellecki's paper serves as a reminder of the need to widen the scope of decision research to also include what he calls 'transgressive' decisions. His paper underlines the necessity to adopt methods and concepts from a variety of disciplines. Furthermore, it illustrates the many problems of this research area and the enormity of the task to improve our understanding of these decision problems with often far-reaching consequences.

References

- Abelson, R.P. and A. Levi, 1985. 'Decision making and decision theory'. In: G. Lindzey and E. Aronson, *Handbook of social psychology*, Vol. 1. New York: Random House. pp 231-309.
- Brehmer, B., H. Jungermann, P. Lourens and G.V. Sévon (eds.), 1986. *New directions in research on decision making*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Carroll, J.S. and J.W. Payne, 1977. 'Judgments about crime and the criminal: A model and a method for investigating parole decisions'. In: B.D. Sales (ed.), *Perspectives in law and psychology*, Vol. 1. The criminal justice system. New York: Plenum. pp. 102-128.
- Einhorn, H.J. and R.M. Hogarth, 1981. *Behavioral decision theory: Processes of judgment and choice*. *Annual Review of Psychology* 32. 53-88.
- Eiser, J.R. and J. van der Pligt, 1988. *Attitudes and decisions*. London: Routledge.
- Fischhoff, B., P. Slovic and S. Lichtenstein, 1978. 'Knowing what you want: Measuring labile values'. In: T.S. Wallsten (ed.), *Cognitive processes in choice and decision behavior*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. pp 64-85.
- Hogarth, R.M., 1988. Transgressive action and inaction: The need to study both. *Acta Psychologica* 70, 65-69, this issue.
- Humphreys, P., O. Svenson and A. Vari (eds.), 1983. *Analysing and aiding decision processes*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Koziellecki, J., 1989. Towards a theory of transgressive decision making: Reaching beyond everyday life. *Acta Psychologica* 70, 43-63, this issue.
- Matlin, M. and D. Stang, 1978. *The Pollyanna principle: Selectivity in language, memory and thought*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- Montgomery, H., 1976. 'A study of intransitive preferences using a think aloud procedure'. In: H. Jungermann and D. de Zeeuw (eds.), *Proceedings of the fifth research conference on subjective probability and decision making*. Amsterdam: North-Holland. pp. 347-362.
- Simon, H.A. and A. Newell, 1974. 'Thinking processes'. In: D.H. Krantz, R.C. Atkinson, R.D. Luce and P. Suppes (eds.), *Contemporary developments in mathematical Psychology*, Vol. 1. San Francisco, CA: Freeman. pp. 101-144.
- Slovic, P., B. Fischhoff and S. Lichtenstein, 1977. *Behavioral decision theory*. *Annual Review of Psychology* 28, 1-39.
- Von Winterfeldt, D. and W. Edwards, 1986. *Decision analysis and behavioral research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.